

THE PATH OF GLORY¹

BY MARY BRECHT PULVER

From The Saturday Evening Post.

IT was so poor a place — a bitten-off morsel “at the beyond end of nowhere” — that when a February gale came driving down out of a steel sky and shut up the little lane road and covered the house with snow a passer-by might have mistaken it all, peeping through its icy fleece, for just a huddle of the brown bowlders so common to the country thereabouts.

And even when there was no snow it was as bad — worse, almost, Luke thought. When everything else went brave and young with new greenery; when the alders were laced with the yellow haze of leaf bud, and the brooks got out of prison again, and arbutus and violet and buttercup went through their rotation of bloom up in the rock pastures and maple bush — the farm buildings seemed only the bleaker and barer.

That forlorn unpainted little house, with its sagging blinds! It squatted there through the year like a one-eyed beggar without a friend — lost in its venerable white-beard winters, or contemplating an untidy welter of rusty farm machinery through the summers.

When Luke brought his one scraggy little cow up the lane he always turned away his head. The place made him think of the old man who let the birds build nests in his whiskers. He preferred, instead, to look at the glories of Bald Mountain or one of the other hills. There was nothing wrong with the back drop in the home stage-set; it was only home itself that hurt one's feelings.

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There was no cheer inside, either. The sagging old floors, though scrubbed and spotless, were uncarpeted; the furniture meager. A pine table, a few old chairs, a shabby scratched settle covered by a thin horse blanket as innocent of nap as a Mexican hairless — these for essentials; and for embellishment a shadeless glass lamp on the table, about six-candle power, where you might make shift to read the *Biweekly* — times when there was enough money to have a *Biweekly* — if you were so minded; and window shelves full of corn and tomato cans, still wearing their horticultural labels, where scrawny one-legged geraniums and yellowing coleus and begonia contrived an existence of sorts.

And then, of course, the mantelpiece with the black-edged funeral notice and shiny coffin plate, relics of Grampaw Peel's taking-off; and the pink mug with the purple pansy and "Woodstock, N. Y.," on it; the photograph of a forgotten cousin in Iowa, with long antennæ-shaped mustaches; the Bible with the little china knobs on the corners; and the pile of medicine testimonials and seed catalogues — all these contributed something.

If it was not a beautiful place within, it was, also, not even a pleasant place spiritually. What with the open door into his father's room, whence you could hear the thin frettings made by the man who had lain these ten years with chronic rheumatism, and the untuneful whistlings of whittling Tom, the big brother, the shapely supple giant whose mind had never grown since the fall from the barn room when he was eight years old, and the acrid complaints of the tall gaunt mother, stepping about getting their inadequate supper, in her gray wrapper, with the ugly little blue shawl pinned round her shoulders, it was as bad a place as you might find in a year's journeying for anyone to keep bright and "chirk up" in.

Not that anyone in particular expected "them poor Hayneses" to keep bright or "chirk up." As far back as he could remember, Luke had realized that the hand of God was laid on his family. Dragging his bad leg up

the hill pastures after the cow, day in and day out, he had evolved a sort of patient philosophy about it. It was just inevitable, like a lot of things known in that rock-ribbed and fatalistic region — as immutably decreed by heaven as foreordination and the damnation of unbaptized babes. The Hayneses had just “got it hard.”

Yet there were times, now he was come to a gangling fourteen, when Luke's philosophy threatened to fail him. It wasn't fair — so it wasn't! They weren't bad folks; they'd done nothing wicked. His mother worked like a dog — “no fair for her,” any way you looked at it. There were times when the boy drank in bitterly every detail of the miserable place he called home and knew the depths of an utter despair.

If there was only some way to better it all! But there was no chance. His father had been a failure at everything he touched in early life, and now he was a hopeless invalid. Tom was an idiot — or almost — and himself a cripple. And Nat! Well, Nat “wa'n't willin'” — not that one should blame him. Times like these, a lump like a roc's egg would rise in the boy's throat. He had to spit — and spit hard — to conquer it.

“If we hain't the gosh-awfulest lot!” he would gulp.

To-day, as he came up the lane, June was in the land. She'd done her best to be kind to the farm. All the old heterogeneous rosebushes in the woodyard and front “lawn” were pied with fragrant bloom. Usually Luke would have lingered to sniff it all, but he saw only one thing now with a sudden skipping at his heart — an automobile standing beside the front porch.

It was not the type of car to cause cardiac disturbance in a connoisseur. It was, in fact, of an early vintage, high-set, chunky, brassily æsthetic, and given to asthmatic choking on occasion; but Luke did not know this. He knew only that it spelled luxury beyond all dreams. It belonged, in short, to his Uncle Clem Cheesman, the rich butcher who lived in the village twelve miles away; and its presence here signaled the fact that Uncle Clem and

Aunt Mollie had come to pay one of their detestable quarterly visits to their poor relations. They had come while he was out, and Maw was in there now, bearing it all alone.

Luke limped into the house hastily. He was not mistaken. There was a company air in the room, a stiff hostile-polite taint in the atmosphere. Three visitors sat in the kitchen, and a large hamper, its contents partly disgorged, stood on the table. Luke knew that it contained gifts — the hateful, merciful, nauseating charity of the better-off.

Aunt Mollie was speaking as he entered — a large, high-colored, pouter-pigeon-chested woman, with a great many rings with bright stones, and a nodding pink plume in her hat. She was holding up a bifurcated crimson garment, and greeted Luke absently.

“Three pair o’ them underdrawers, Delia — an’ not a break in one of ’em! I sez, as soon as I see Clem layin’ ’em aside this spring, ‘Them things’ll be jest right fur Delia’s Jere, layin’ there with the rheumatiz.’ They may come a little loose; but, of course, you can’t be choicey. I’ve b’en at Clem fur five years to buy him union suits; but he’s always b’en so stuck on red flannen. But now he’s got two aut’mobiles, countin’ the new delivery, I guess he’s gotta be more tony; so he made out to spare ’em. And now that hat, Delia — it ain’t a mite wore out, an’ fur all you’ll need one it’s plenty good enough. I only had it two years and I guess folks won’t remember; an’ what if they do — they all know you get my things. Same way with that collarette. It’s a little moth-eaten, but it won’t matter fur you. . . . The gray suit you can easy cut down fur Luke, there —”

She droned on, the other woman making dry automatic sounds of assent. She looked cool — Maw — Luke thought; but she wasn’t. Not by a darn sight! There was a spot of pink in each cheek and she stared hard every little bit at Grampaw Peel’s funeral plate on the mantel. Luke knew what she was thinking of — poor

Maw! She was burning in a fire of her own lighting. She had brought it all on herself — on the whole lot of them.

Years ago she had been just like Aunt Mollie. The daughters of a prosperous village carpenter, they had shared beads, beaux and bangles until Maw, in a moment's madness, had chucked it all away to marry poor Paw. Now she had made her bed, she must lie in it. Must sit and say "Thank you!" for Aunt Mollie's leavings, precious scraps she dared not refuse — Maw, who had a pride as fierce and keen as any! It was devilish! Oh, it was kind of Aunt Mollie to give; it was the taking that came so bitter hard. And then they weren't genteel about their giving. There was always that air of superiority, that conscious patronage, as now, when Uncle Clem, breaking off his conversation with the invalid in the next room about the price of mutton on the hoof and the chances of the Democrats' getting in again, stopped fiddling with his thick plated watch chain and grinned across at big Tom to fling his undeviating flower of wit:

"Runnin' all to beef, hain't ye, Tom, boy? Come on down to the market an' we'll git some A 1 sirloins outen ye, anyway. Do your folks that much good."

It was things like this that made Luke want to burn, poison, or shoot Uncle Clem. He was not a bad man, Uncle Clem — a thick sandy chunk of a fellow, given to bright neckties and a jocosity that took no account of feelings. Shaped a little like a log, he was — back of his head and back of his neck — all of a width. Little lively green eyes and bristling red mustaches. A complexion a society bud might have envied. Why was it a butcher got so pink and white and sleek? Pork, that's what Uncle Clem resembled, Luke thought — a nice, smooth, pale-fleshed pig, ready to be skinned.

His turn next! When crops and politics failed and the joke at poor Tom — Tom always giggled inordinately at it, too — had come off, there was sure to be the one about himself and the lame duck next. To divert himself of

bored expectation, Luke turned to stare at his cousin, S'norta.

S'norta, sitting quietly in a chair across the room, was seldom known to be emotional. Indeed, there were times when Luke wondered whether she had not died in her chair. One had that feeling about S'norta, so motionless was she, so uncompromising of glance. She was very prosperous-looking, as became the heiress to the Cheesman meat business—a fat little girl of twelve, dressed with a profusion of ruffles, glass pearls, gilt buckles, and thick tawny curls that might have come straight from the sausage hook in her papa's shop.

S'norta had been consecrated early in life to the unusual. Even her name was not ordinary. Her romantic mother, immersed in the prenatal period in the hair-lifting adventures of one Señorita Carmena, could think of no lovelier appellation when her darling came than the first portion of that sloe-eyed and restless lady's title, which she conceived to be baptismal; and in due course she had conferred it, together with her own pronunciation, on her child. A bold man stopping in at Uncle Clem's market, as Luke knew, had once tried to pronounce and expound the cognomen in a very different fashion; but he had been hustled unceremoniously from the place, and S'norta remained in undisturbed possession of her honors.

Now Luke was recalled from his contemplation by his uncle's voice again. A lull had fallen and out of it broke the question Luke always dreaded.

"Nat, now!" said Uncle Clem, leaning forward, his thick fingers clutching his fat knees. "You ain't had any news of him since quite a while ago, have you?" The wit that was so preponderable a feature of Uncle Clem's nature bubbled to the surface. "Dunno but he's landed in jail a spell back and can't git out again!" The lively little eyes twinkled appreciatively.

Nobody answered. It set Maw's mouth in a thin, hard line. You wouldn't get a rise out of old Maw with such

tactics — Maw, who believed in Nat, soul and body. Into Luke's mind flashed suddenly a formless half prayer: "Don't let 'em nag her now — make 'em talk other things!"

The Lord, in the guise of Aunt Mollie, answered him. For once, Nat and Nat's character and failings did not hold her. She drew a deep breath and voiced something that claimed her interest:

"Well, Delia, I see you wasn't out at the Bisbee's funeral. Though I don't s'pose anyone really expected you, knowin' how things goes with you. Time was, when you was a girl, you counted in as big as any and traveled with the best; but now" — she paused delicately, and coughed politely with an appreciative glance round the poor room — "they ain't anyone hereabouts but's talkin' about it. My land, it was swell! I couldn't ask no better for my own. Fourteen cabs, and the hearse sent over from Rockville — all pale gray, with mottled gray horses. It was what I call tasty.

"Matty wasn't what you'd call well-off — not as lucky as some I could mention; but she certainly went off grand! The whole Methodist choir was out, with three numbers in broken time; and her cousin's brother-in-law from out West — some kind of bishop — to preach. Honest, it was one of the grandest sermons I ever heard! Wasn't it, Clem?"

Uncle Clem cleared his throat thoughtfully.

"Humiliatin'! — that's what I'd call it. A strong maur'l sermon all round. A man couldn't hear it 'thout bein' humiliated more ways'n one." He was back at the watch-chain again.

"It's a pity you couldn't of gone, Delia — you an' Matty always was so intimate too. You certainly missed a grand treat, I can tell you; though, if you hadn't the right clothes —"

"Well, I haven't," Maw spoke dryly. "I don't go no-where, as you know — not even church."

"I s'pose not. Time was it was different, though,

Delia. Ain't nobody but talks how bad off you are. Ann Chester said she seen you in town a while back and wouldn't of knowed it was you if it hadn't of b'en you was wearin' my old brown cape, an' she reconnized it. Her an' me got 'em both alike to the same store in Rockville. You was so changed, she said she couldn't hardly believe it was you at all."

"Sometimes I wonder myself if it is," said Maw grimly.

"Well, 's I was sayin', it was a grand funeral. None better! They even had engraved invites, over a hundred printed — and they had folks from all over the state. They give Clem, here, the contract fur the supper meat —"

"The best of everything!" Uncle Clem broke in. "None o' your cheap graft. Gimme a free hand. Jim Bisbee tole me himself. 'I want the best ye got,' he sez; an' I give it. Spring lamb and prime ribs, fancy hotel style —"

"An' Em Carson baked the cakes fur 'em, sixteen of 'em; an' Dickison the undertaker's tellin' all over they got the best quality shroud he carries. Well, you'll find it all in the *Biweekly*, under Death's Busy Sickle. Jim Bisbee shore set a store by Matty oncet she was dead. It was a grand affair, Delia. Not but what we've had some good ones in our time too."

It was Aunt Mollie's turn to stare pridefully at the Peel plate on the chimney shelf.

"A thing like that sets a family up, sorta."

Uncle Clem had taken out a fat black cigar with a red-white-and-blue band. He bit off the end and alternately thrust it between his lips or felt of its thickness with a fondling thumb and finger. Luke, watching, felt a sudden compassion for the cigar. It looked so harried.

"I always say," Aunt Mollie droned on, "a person shows up what he really is at the last — what him and his family stands fur. It's what kind of a funeral you've got that counts — who comes out an' all. An' that was

true with Matty. There wa'n't a soul worth namin' that wasn't out to hers."

How Aunt Molly could gouge — even amicably! And funerals! What a subject, even in a countryside where a funeral is a social event and the manner of its furniture marks a definite social status! Would they never go? But it seemed at last they would. Incredibly, somehow, they were taking their leave, Aunt Mollie kissing Maw good-by, with the usual remark about "hopin' the things would help some," and about being "glad to spare somethin' from my great plenty."

She and Señorita were presently packed into the car and Tom had gone out to goggle at Uncle Clem cranking up, the cold cigar still between his lips. Now they were off — choking and snorting their way out of the wood-yard and down the lane. Aunt Mollie's pink feather streamed into the breeze like a pennon of triumph.

Maw was standing by the stove, a queer look in her eyes; so queer that Luke didn't speak at once. He limped over to finger the spilled treasures on the table.

"Gee! Lookit, Maw! More o' them prunes we liked so; an' a bag o' early peaches; an' fresh soup meat fur a week —"

A queer trembling had seized his mother. She was so white he was frightened.

"Did you sense what it meant, Luke — what Aunt Molly told us about Matty Bisbee? We was left out deliberate — that's what it meant. Her an' me that was raised together an' went to school and picnics all our girlhood together! Never could see one 'thout the other when we was growin' up — Jim Bisbee knew that too! But" — her voice wavered miserably — "I didn't get no invite to her funeral. I don't count no more, Lukey. None of us, anywheres. . . . We're jest them poor Gawd-forsaken Hayneses."

She slipped down suddenly into a chair and covered

her face, her thin shoulders shaking. Luke went and touched her awkwardly. Times he would have liked to put his arms round Maw — now more than ever; but he didn't dare.

"Don't take on, Maw! Don't!"

"Who's takin' on?" She lifted a fierce, sallow, tear-wet face. "Hain't no use makin' a fuss. All's left's to work — to work, an' die after a while."

"I hate 'em! Uncle Clem an' her, I mean."

"They mean kindness — their way." But her tears started afresh.

"I hate 'em!" Luke's voice grew shriller. "I'd like — I'd like — Oh, damn 'em!"

"Don't swear, boy!"

It was Tom who broke in on them. "It's a letter from Rural Free Delivery. He jest dropped it."

He came up, grinning, with the missive. The mother's fingers closed on it nervously.

"From Nat, mebbe — he ain't wrote in months."

But it wasn't from Nat. It was a bill for a last payment on the "new harrow," bought three years before.

II

One of the earliest memories Luke could recall was the big blurred impression of Nat's face bending over his crib of an evening. At first flat, indefinite, remote as the moon, it grew with time to more human, intimate proportions. It became the face of "brother," the black-haired, blue-eyed big boy who rollicked on the floor with or danced him on his knee to —

This is the way the lady rides!
Tritty-trot-trot; tritty-trot-trot!

Or who, returning from school and meeting his faltering feet in the lane, would toss him up on his shoulder and canter him home with mad, merry scamperings.

Not that school and Nat ever had much in common. Even as a little shaver Luke had realized that. Nat was the family wilding, the migratory bird that yearned for other climes. There were the times when he sulked long days by the fire, and the springs and autumns when he played an unending round of hookey. There were the days when he was sent home from school in disgrace; when protesting notes, and sometimes even teacher, arrived.

"It's not that Nat's a bad boy, Mrs. Haynes," he remembered one teacher saying; "but he's so active, so full of restless animal spirits. How are we ever going to tame him?"

Maw didn't know the answer — that was sure. She loved Nat best — Luke had guessed it long ago, by the tone of her voice when she spoke to him, by the touch of her hand on his head, or the size of his apple turnover, so much bigger than the others'. Maw must have built heavily on her hopes of Nat those days — her one perfect child. She was so proud of him! In the face of all ominous prediction she would fling her head high.

"My Nat's a Peel!" she would say. "Can't never tell how he'll turn out."

The farmers thereabouts thought they could tell her. Nat was into one scrape after another — nothing especially wicked; but a compound of the bubbling mischief in a too ardent life — robbed orchards, broken windows, practical jokes, Halloween jinks, vagrant whimsies of an active imagination.

It was just that Nat's quarters were too small for him, chiefly. Even he realized this presently. Luke would never forget the sloppy March morning when Nat went away. He was wakened by a flare of candle in the room he shared with his brothers. Tom, the twelve-year-old, lay sound asleep; but Nat, the big man of fifteen, was up, dressed, bending over something he was writing on a paper at the bureau. There was a fat little bundle beside him, done up in a blue-and-white bandanna.

Day was still far off. The window showed black; there was the sound of a thaw running off the eaves; the whitewashed wall was painted with grotesque leaping shadows by the candle flame. At the first murmur, Nat had come and put his arms about him.

"Don't ye holler, little un; don't ye do it! 'Tain't nothin'—on'y Natty's goin' away a spell; quite a spell, little un. Now kiss Natty. . . . That's right! . . . An' you lay still there an' don't holler. An' listen here, too: Natty's goin' to bring ye somethin'—a grand red ball, mebbe—if you're good. You wait an' sec!"

But Natty hadn't brought the ball. Two years had passed without a scrap of news of him; and then—he was back. Slipped into the village on a freighter at dusk one evening. A forlorn scarecrow Nat was; so tattered of garment, so smeared of coal dust, you scarcely knew him. So full of strange sophistications, too, and new trails of thought—so oddly rich of experience. He gave them his story. The tale of an exigent life in a great city; a piecework life made of such flotsam labors as he could pick up, of spells of loafing, of odd incredible associates, of months tagging a circus, picking up a task here and there, of long journeyings through the country, "riding the bumpers"—even of alms asked at back doors!

"Oh, not a tramp, Nat!"

The hurt had quivered all through Maw.

But Nat only laughed.

"Jiminy Christmas, it was great!"

He had thrown back his head, laughing. That was Nat all through—sipping of life generously, no matter in what form.

He had stayed just three weeks. He had spent them chiefly defeating Maw's plans to keep him. Wanderlust kept him longer the next time. That was eight years ago. Since then he had been back home three times. Never so poor and shabby as at first—indeed, Nat's wanderings had prospered more or less—but still remote, some-

what mysterious, touched by new habits of life, new ways of speech.

The countryside, remembering the manner of his first return, shook its head darkly. A tramp — a burglar, even. God knew what! When, on his third visit home, he brought an air of extreme opulence, plenty of money, and a sartorial perfection undreamed of locally, the heads wagged even harder. A gambler probably; a ne'er-do-well certainly; and one to break his mother's heart in the end.

But none of this was true, as Luke knew. It was just that Nat hated farming; that he liked to rove and take a floater's fortune. He had a taste for the mechanical and followed incomprehensible quests. San Francisco had known him; the big races at Cincinnati; the hangars of Mineola. He was restless — Nat; but he was respectable. No one could look into his merry blue eyes and not know it. If his labors were uncertain and sporadic, and his address that of a nomad, it all sufficed, at least for himself.

If at times Luke felt a stirring doubt that Nat was not acquitting himself of his family duty, he quenched it fiercely. Nat was different. He was born free; you could tell it in his talk, in his way of thinking. He was like an eagle and hated to be bound by earthly ties. He cared for them all in his own way. Times when he was back he helped Maw all he could. If he brought money he gave of it freely; if he had none, just the look of his eye or the ready jest on his lip helped.

Upstairs in a drawer of the old pine bureau lay some of Nat's discarded clothing — incredible garments to Luke. The lame boy, going to them sometimes, fingered them, pondering, reconstructing for himself the fabric of Nat's adventures, his life. The ice-cream pants of a by-gone day; the pointed, shriveled yellow Oxfords! the silk-front shirt; the odd cuff link or stud — they were like a genie-in-a-bottle, these poor clothes! You rubbed them and a whole Arabian Night's dream unfurled from them.

And Nat lived it all! But people — dull stodgy people like Uncle Clem and Aunt Mollie, and old Beckonridge down at the store, and a dozen others — these criticized him for not “workin’ reg’lar” and giving a full account of himself.

Luke, thinking of all this, would flush with impotent anger.

“Oh, let ’em talk, though! He’ll show ’em some day! They dunno Nat. He’ll do somethin’ big fur us all some day.”

III

Midsummer came to trim the old farm with her wreaths. It was the time Luke loved best of all — the long, sweet, loam-scented evenings with Maw and Tom on the old porch; and sometimes — when there was no fog — Paw’s cot, wheeled out in the stillness. But Maw was not herself this summer. Something had fretted and eaten into her heart like an acid ever since Aunt Mollie’s visit and the news of Matty Bisbee’s funeral.

When, one by one, the early summer festivities of the neighborhood had slipped by, with no inclusion of the Hayneses, she had fallen to brooding deeply, — to feeling more bitterly than ever the ignominy and wretchedness of their position.

Luke tried to comfort her; to point out that this summer was like any other; that they “never had mattered much to folks.” But Maw continued to brood; to allude vaguely and insistently to “the straw that broke the camel’s back.” It was bitter hard to have Maw like that — home was bad enough, anyway. Sometimes on clear, soft nights, when the moon came out all splendid and the “peepers” sang so plaintively in the Hollow, the boy’s heart would fill and grow enormous in his chest with the intolerable sadness he felt.

Then Maw’s mood lifted — pierced by a ray of heavenly sunlight — for Nat came home!

Luke saw him first — heard him, rather; for Nat came up the lane — oh, miraculous! — driving a motor car. It was not a car like Uncle Clem's — not even a stepbrother to it. It was low and almost noiseless, and shaped like one of those queer torpedoes they were fighting with across the water. It was colored a soft dust-gray and trimmed with nickel; and, huge and powerful though it was, it swung to a mere touch of Nat's hand.

Nat stood before them, clad in black leather Norfolk and visored cap and leggings.

"Look like a fancy brand of chauffeur, don't I?" he laughed, with the easy resumption of a long-broken relation that was so characteristically Nat.

But Nat was not a chauffeur. Something much bigger and grander. The news he brought them on top of it all took their breaths away. Nat was a special demonstrator, out on a brand-new high-class job for a house handling a special line of high-priced goods. And he was to go to Europe in another week — did they get it straight? Europe! Jiminy! He and another fellow were taking cars over to France and England.

No; they didn't quite get it. They could not grasp its significance, but clung humbly, instead, to the mere glorious fact of his presence.

He stayed two days and a night; and summer was never lovelier. Maw was like a girl, and there was such a killing of pullets and extravagance with new-laid eggs as they had never known before. At the last he gave them all presents.

"Tell the truth," he laughed, "I'm stony broke. 'Tisn't mine, all this stuff you see. I got some kale in advance — not much, but enough to swing me; but of course, the outfit's the company's. But I'll tell you one thing: I'm going to bring some long green home with me, you can bet! And when I do" — Nat had given Maw a prodigious nudge in the ribs — "when I do — I ain't goin' to stay an old bachelor forever! Do you get that?"

Maw's smile had faded for a moment. But the pres-

ents were fine — a new knife for Tom, a book for Luke, and twenty whole round dollars for Maw, enough to pay that old grocery bill down at Beckonridge's and Paw's new invoice of patent medicine.

They all stood on the porch and watched him as far as they could see; and Maw's black mood didn't return for a whole week.

Evenings now they had something different to talk about — journeys in seagoing craft; foreign countries and the progress of the "Ee-ropean" war, and Nat's likelihood — he had laughed at this — of touching even its fringe. They worked it all up from the boiler-plate war news in the *Bi-weekly* and Luke's school geography. Yes; for a little space the blackness was lifted.

Then came the August morning when Paw died. This was an unexpected and unsettling contingency. One doesn't look for a "chronic's" doing anything so unscheduled and foreign to routine; but Paw spoiled all precedent. They found him that morning with his heart quite still, and Luke knew they stood in the presence of imminent tragedy.

It's all very well to peck along, hand-to-mouth fashion. You can manage a living of sorts; and farm produce, even scanty, unskillfully contrived, and the charity of relatives, and the patience of tradesmen, will see you through. But a funeral — that's different! Undertaker — that means money. Was it possible that the sordid epic of their lives must be capped by the crowning insult, the Poormaster and the Pauper's Field? If only poor Paw could have waited a little before he claimed the spotlight — until prices fell a little or Nat got back with that "long green"!

Maw swallowed her bitter pill.

She went to see Uncle Clem and ask! And Uncle Clem was kind.

"He'll buy a casket — he's willin' fur that — an' send a wreath and pay fur notices, an' even half on a buryin' lot; but he said he couldn't do no more. The high cost

has hit him too. . . . An' where are we to git the rest? He said — at the last — it might be better all round fur us to take what Ellick Flick would gimme outen the Poor Fund —" Maw hadn't been able to go on for a spell.

A pauper's burial for Paw! Surely Maw would manage better than that! She tried to find a better way that very night.

"This farm's mortgaged to the neck; but I calculate Ben Travis won't care if I'm a mind to put Paw in the south field. It hain't no mortal good fur anything else, anyhow; an' he can lay there if we want. It's a real pleasant place. An' I can git the preacher myself — I'll give him the rest o' the broilers; an' they's seasoned hickory plankin' in the lean-to. Tom, you come along with me."

All night Luke had lain and listened to the sound of big Tom's saw and hammer. Tom was real handy if you told him how — and Maw would be showing him just how to shape it all out. Each hammer blow struck deep on the boy's heart.

Maw lined the home-made box herself with soft old quilts, and washed and dressed her dead herself in his faded outlawed wedding clothes. And on a morning soft and sweet, with a hint of rain in the air, they rode down in the farm wagon to the south field together — Paw and Maw and Luke — with big Tom walking beside the aged knobby horse's head.

Abel Gazzam, a neighbor, had seen to the grave; and in due course the little cavalcade reached the appointed spot inside the snake fence — a quiet place in a corner, under a graybeard elm. As Maw had said, it was "a pleasant place for Paw to lay in."

There were some old neighbors out in their own rigs, and Uncle Clem had brought his family up in his car, with a proper wreath; and Reverend Kearns came up and — declining all lien on the broilers — read the burial service, and spoke a little about poor Paw. But it wasn't

a funeral, no how. No supper; no condolence; no viewing "the remains"—not even a handshake! Maw didn't even look at her old friends, riding back home between Tom and Luke, with her head fiercely high in the air.

A dull depression settled on Luke's heart. It was all up with the Hayneses now. They had saved Paw from charity with their home-made burial; but what had it availed? They might as well have gone the whole figure. Everybody knew! There wasn't any comeback for a thing like this. They were just nobodies—the social pariahs of the district.

IV

Somehow, after the fashion of other years, they got their meager crops in—turnips, potatoes and Hubbard squashes put up in the vegetable cellar; oats cradled; corn husked; the buckwheat ready for the mill; even Tom's crooked furrows for the spring sowings made. Somehow, Maw helping like a man and Tom obeying like a docile child, they took toll of their summer. And suddenly September was at their heels—and then the equinox.

It seemed to Luke that it had never rained so much before. Brown vapor rose eternally from the valley flats; the hilltops lay lost entirely in clotted murk. By periods hard rains, like showers of steel darts, beat on the soaking earth. Gypsy gales of wind went ricocheting among the farm buildings, setting the shingles to snapping and singing; the windows moaned and rattled. The sourest weather the boy could remember!

And on the worst day of all they got the news. Out of the mail box in the lane Luke got it—going down under an old rubber cape in a steady blinding pour. It got all damp—the letter, foreign postmark, stamp and all—by the time he put it into Maw's hand.

It was a double letter—or so one judged, first opening it. There was another inside, complete, sealed, and

addressed in Nat's hand; but one must read the paper inclosed with it first — that was obvious. It was just a strip, queer, official looking, with a few lines typed upon it and a black heading that sprang out at one strangely. They read it together — or tried to. At first they got no sense from it. Paris — from clear off in France — and then the words below — and Maw's name at the top, just like the address on the newspaper:

MRS. JERE HAYNES,
Stony Brook, New York.

It was for Maw all right. Then quite suddenly the words came clear through the blur:

MRS. JERE HAYNES,
Stony Brook, New York.

Dear Madam: We regret to inform you that the official *communiqué* for September sixth contains the tidings that the writer of the enclosed letter, Nathaniel Haynes, of Stony Brook, New York, U. S. A., was killed while on duty as an ambulance driver in the Sector of Verdun, and has been buried in that region. Further details will follow.

The American Ambulance, Paris.

Even when she realized, Maw never cried out. She sat wetting her lips oddly, looking at the words that had come like evil birds across the wide spaces of earth. It was Luke who remembered the other letter:

"My dear kind folks — Father, Mother and Brothers: I guess I dare call you that when I get far enough away from you. Perhaps you won't mind when I tell you my news.

"Well we came over from England last Thursday and struck into our contract here. Things was going pretty

good; but you might guess yours truly couldn't stand the dead end of things. I bet Maw's guessed already. Well sir it's that roving streak in me I guess. Never could stick to nothing steady. It got me bad when I got here any how.

"To cut it short I throwed up my job with the firm yesterday and have volunteered as an Ambulance driver. Nothing but glory; but I'm going to like it fine! They're short-handed anyhow and a fellow likes to help what he can. Wish I could send a little money; but it took all I had to outfit me. Had to cough up eight bucks for a suit of underclothes. What do you know about that?

"You can write me in care of the Ambulance, Paris.

"Now Maw don't worry! I'm not going to fight. I did try to get into the Foreign Legion but had no chance. I'm all right. Think of me as a nice little Red Cross boy and the Wise Willie on the gas wagon. And won't I have the hot stuff to make old Luke's eyes pop out! Hope Paw's legs are better. And Maw have a kiss on me. Mebbe you folks think I don't appreciate you. If I was any good at writing I'd tell you different.

"Your Son and Brother,

"NAT HAYNES."

The worst of it all was about Maw's not crying—just sitting there staring at the fire, or where the fire had been when the wood had died out of neglect. It's not in reason that a woman shouldn't cry, Luke felt. He tried some words of comfort:

"He's safe, anyhow, Maw—'member that! That's a whole lot too. Didn't always know that, times he was rollin' round so over here. You worried a whole lot about him, you know."

But Maw didn't answer. She seldom spoke at all—moved about as little as possible. When she had put out food for him and Tom she always went back to her corner and stared into the fire. Luke had to bring a plate to her and coax her to eat. Even the day Uncle Clem

and Aunt Mollie came up she did not notice them. Only once she spoke of Nat to Luke.

"You loved him the most, didn't ye, Maw?" he asked timidly one dreary evening.

She answered in a sort of dull surprise.

"Why, lad, he was my first!" she said; and after a bit, as though to herself: "His head was that round and shiny when he was a little fellow it was like to a little round apple. I mind, before he ever come, I bought me a cap fur him over to Rockville, with a blue bow onto it. He looked awful smart an' pretty in it."

Sometimes in the night Luke, sleeping ill and thinking long, lay and listened for possible sounds from Maw's room. Perhaps she cried in the nights. If she only would—it would help break the tension for them all. But he never heard anything but the rain—steadily, miserably beating on the sodden shingles overhead.

It was only Luke who watched the mail box now. One morning his journey to it bore fruit. No sting any longer; no fear in the thick foreign letter he carried.

"It'll tell ye all's to it, I bet!" he said eagerly.

Maw seemed scarcely interested. It was Luke who broke the seal and read it aloud.

It was written from the Ambulance Headquarters, in Paris—written by a man of rare insight, of fine and delicate perception. All that Nat's family might have wished to learn he sought to tell them. He had himself investigated Nat's story and he gave it all fully and freely. He spoke in praise of Nat; of his friendly associations with the Ambulance men; of his good nature and cheerful spirits; his popularity and ready willingness to serve. People, one felt, had loved Nat over there.

He wrote of the preliminary duties in Paris, the preparations—of Nat's final going to join one of the three sections working round Verdun. It wasn't easy work that waited for Nat there. It was a stiff contract guiding the little ambulance over the shell-rutted roads, with

deftness and precision, to those distant dressing stations where the hurt soldiers waited for him. It was a picture that thrilled Luke and made his pulses tingle — the blackness of the nights; the rumble of moving artillery and troops; the flash of starlights; the distant crackling of rifle fire; the steady thunder of heavy guns.

And the shells! It was mighty close they swept to a fellow, whistling, shrieking, low overhead; falling to tear out great gouges in the earth. It was enough to wreck one's nerve utterly; but the fellows that drove were all nerve. Just part of the day's work to them! And that was Nat too. Nat hadn't known what fear was — he'd eaten it alive. The adventurer in him had gone out to meet it joyously.

Nat was only on his third trip when tragedy had come to him. He and a companion were seeking a dressing station in the cellar of a little ruined house in an obscure French village, when a shell had burst right at their feet, so to speak. That was all. Simple as that. Nat was dead instantly and his companion — oh, Nat was really the lucky one. . . .

Luke had to stop for a little time. One couldn't go on at once before a thing like that. . . . When he did, it was to leave behind the darkness, the shell-torn houses, the bruised earth, the racked and mutilated humans. . . . Reading on, it was like emerging from Hades into a great Peace.

"I wish it were possible to convey to you, my dear Mrs. Haynes, some impression of the moving and beautiful ceremony with which your son was laid to rest on the morning of September ninth, in the little village of Aucourt. Imagine a warm, sunny, late-summer day, and a village street sloping up a hillside, filled with soldiers in faded, dusty blue, and American Ambulance drivers in khaki.

"In the open door of one of the houses, the front of which was covered with the tri-color of France, the

coffin was placed, wrapped in a great French flag, and covered with flowers and wreaths sent by the various American sections. At the head a small American flag was placed, on which was pinned the *Croix de Guerre* — a gold star on a red-and-green ribbon — a tribute from the army general to the boy who gave his life for France.

“A priest, with six soldier attendants, led the procession from the courtyard. Six more soldiers bore the coffin, the Americans and representatives of the army branches following, bearing wreaths. After these came the General of the Army Corps, with a group of officers, and a detachment of soldiers with arms reversed. At the foot of the hill a second detachment fell in and joined them.’ . . .

“The scene was unforgettable, beautiful and impressive. In the little church a choir of soldiers sang and a soldier-priest played the organ, while the Chaplain of the Army Division held the burial service. The chaplain’s sermon I have asked to have reproduced and sent to you, together with other effects of your son’s. . . .

“The chaplain spoke most beautifully and at length, telling very tenderly what it meant to the French people that an American should give his life while trying to help them in the hour of their extremity. The name of this chaplain is Henri Deligny, *Aumônier Militaire*, Ambulance 16-27, Sector 112; and he was assisted by the permanent curé of the little church, Abbé Blondelle, who wishes me to assure you that he will guard most reverently your son’s grave, and be there to receive you when the day may come that you shall wish to visit it.

“After leaving the church the procession marched to the military cemetery, where your son’s body was laid beside the hundreds of others who have died for France. Both the lieutenant and general here paid tributes of appreciation, which I will have sent to you. The general, various officers of the army, and ambulance assisted in the last rites. . . .

"I have brought back and will send you the *Croix de Guerre*. . . ."

Oh, but you couldn't read any further — for the great lump of pride in your throat, the thick mist of tears in your eyes. A sob escaped the boy. He looked over at Maw and saw the miraculous. Maw was awake at last and crying — a new-fledged pulsating Maw emerged from the brown chrysalis of her sorrows.

"Oh, Maw! . . . Our Nat! . . . All that — that — funeral! . . . Some funeral, Maw!" The boy choked.

"My Nat!" Maw was saying. "Buried like a king! . . . Like a King o' France!" She clasped her hands tightly.

It was like some beautiful fantasy. A Haynes — the despised and rejected of earth — borne to his last home with such pomp and ceremony!

"There never was nothin' like it heard of round here, Maw. . . . If folks could only know —"

She lifted her head as at a challenge.

"Why, they're goin' to know, Luke — for I'm goin' to tell 'em. Folks that have talked behind Nat's back — folks that have pitied us — when they see this — like a King o' France!" she repeated softly. "I'm goin' down to town to-day, Luke."

V

It was dusk when Maw came back; dusk of a clear day, with a rosy sunset off behind the hills. Luke opened the door for her and he saw that she had brought some of the sun along in with her — its colors in her worn face; its peace in her eyes. She was the same, yet somehow new. Even the tilt of her crazy old bonnet could not detract from a strange new dignity that clothed her.

She did not speak at once, going over to warm her

gloveless hands at the stove, and staring up at the Gram-paw Peel plate; then:

"When it comes — my Nat's medal — it's goin' to set right up here, 'stead o' this old thing — an' the letters and the sermons in my shell box I got on my weddin' trip. . . . Lawyer Ritchie told me to-day what it means, the name o' that medal — Cross o' War! It's a decoration fur soldiers and earned by bravery."

She paused; then broke out suddenly:

"I b'en a fool, settin' here grievin'. My Nat was a hero, an' I never knew it! . . . A hero's folks hadn't ought to cry. It's a thing too big for that. Come here, you little Luke! Maw hain't b'en real good to you an' Tommy lately. You're gittin' all white an' peaked. Too much frettin' 'bout Nat. You an' me's got to stop it, I tell you. Folks round here ain't goin' to let us fret —"

"Folks! Maw!" The words burst from the boy's heart. "Did they find out? . . . You showed it to 'em? Uncle Clem —"

Maw sniffed.

"Clem! Oh, he was real took aback; but he don't count in on this — not big enough." Then triumph hastened her story. "It's the big ones that's mixin' into this, Lukey. Seems like they'd heard somethin' a spell back in one o' the county papers, an' we didn't know. . . . Anyhow, when I first got into town I met Judge Geer. He had me right into his office in Masonic Hall, 'fore I could git my breath almost — had me settin' in his private room, an' sent his stenugifer out fur a cup o' cawfee fur me. He had me give him the letter to read, an' asked dare he make some copies. The stenugifer took 'em like lightnin', right there.

"The judge had a hard time of it, coughin' an' blowin' over that letter. He's goin' to send some copies to the New York papers right off. He took me acrost the hall and interduced me to Lawyer Ritchie. Lawyer Ritchie, he read the letter too. 'A hero!' they called Nat; an' me 'A hero's mother!'

“ ‘ We ain’t goin’ to forgit this, Mis’ Haynes,’ Lawyer Ritchie said. ‘ This here whole town’s proud o’ your Nat.’ . . . My land! I couldn’t sense it all! . . . Me, Delia Haynes, gettin’ her hand wrung, ’count o’ anything Nat’d b’en doin’, by the big bugs round town! Judge Geer, he fetched ’em all out o’ their offices — Slade, the supervisor, and Fuller Brothers, and old Sumner Pratt — an’ all! An’ Ben Watson asked could he have a copy to put in the *Bi-weekly*. It’s goin’ to take the whole front page, with an editor’al inside. He said the Rockville Center News’d most likely copy it too.

“ I was like in a dream! . . . All I’d aimed to do was to let some o’ them folks know that those people acrost the ocean had thought well of our Nat, an’ here they was breakin’ their necks to git in on it too! . . . Goin’ down the street they was more of it. Lu Shiffer run right out o’ the hardware store an’ left the nails he was weighin’ to shake hands with me; and Jem Brand came; and Lan’lord Peters come out o’ the Valley House an’ spoke to me. . . . I felt awful public. An’ Jim Beckonridge come out of the Emporium to shake too.

“ ‘ I ain’t seen you down in town fur quite a spell,’ he sez. ‘ How are you all up there to the farm? . . . Want to say I’m real proud o’ Nat — a boy from round here!’ he sez. . . . Old Beckonridge, that was always wantin’ to arrest Nat fur takin’ his chestnuts or foolin’ down in the store!

“ I just let ’em drift — seein’ they had it all fixed fur me. All along the street they come an’ spoke to me. Mame Parmlee, that ain’t b’en able to see me fur three years, left off sweepin’ her porch an’ come down an’ shook my hand, an’ cried about it; an’ that stylish Mis’ Willowby, that’s president o’ the Civil Club, followed me all over the Square and asked dare she read a copy o’ the letter an’ tell about Nat to the schoolhouse next Wednesday.

“ It seems Judge Geer had gone out an’ spread it broadcast that I was in town, for they followed me every-

where. Next thing I run into Reverend Kearns and Reverend Higby, huntin' me hard. They both had one idee.

" 'We wanted to have a memor'al service to the churches 'bout Nat,' they sez; 'then it come over us that it was the town's affair really. So, Mis' Haynes,' they sez, 'we want you should share this thing with us. You mustn't be selfish. You gotta give us a little part in it too. Are you willin'?' "

" It knocked me dumb — me givin' anybody anything! Well, to finish, they's to be a big public service in the Town Hall on Friday. They'll have it all flags — French ones, an' our'n too. An' the ministers'll preach; an' Judge Geer'll tell Nat's story an' speak about him; an' the Ladies' Guild'll serve a big hot supper, because they'll probably be hundreds out; an' they'll read the letters an' have prayers for our Nat!" She faltered a moment. " An' we'll be there too — you an' me an' Tom — settin' in the seat o' honor, right up front! . . . It'll be the greatest funeral service this town's ever seen, Luke."

Maw's face was crimson with emotion.

" An' Uncle Clem an' Aunt Mollie —"

" Oh — them!" Maw came back to earth and smiled tolerantly. " They was real sharp to be in it too. Mollie took me into the parlor an' fetched a glass o' wine to stren'then me up." Maw mused a moment; then spoke with a touch of patronage: " I'm goin' to knit Clem some new socks this winter. He says he can't git none like the oldtime wool ones; an' the market floors are cold. Clem's done what he could, an' I'll be real glad to help him out. . . . Oh, I asked 'em to come an' set with us at the service — S'norta too. I allowed we could manage to spare 'em the room."

She dreamed again, launched on a sea of glory; then roused to her final triumph:

" But that's only part, Luke. The best's comin'. Jim Beckonridge wants you to go down an' see him. 'That lame boy o' yours,' he sez, 'was in here a spell ago with

some notion about raisin' bees an' buckwheat together, an' gittin' a city market fur buckwheat honey. Slipped my mind,' he sez, 'till I heard what Nat'd done; an' then it all come back. City party this summer had the same notion an' was lookin' out for a likely place to invest some cash in. You send that boy down an' we'll talk it over. Shouldn't wonder if he'd get some backin'. I calculate I might help him, myself,' he sez, 'I b'en thinkin' of it too.' . . . Don't seem like it could hardly be true."

"Oh, Maw!" Luke's pulses were leaping wildly. Buckwheat honey was the dear dream of many a long hour's wistful meditation. "If we could—I could study up about it an' send away fur printed books. We could make some money —"

But Maw had not yet finished.

"An' they's some about Tom, too, Luke! That young Doctor Wells down there—he's on'y b'en there a year—he come right up, an' spoke to me, in the midst of several. 'I want to talk about your boy,' he sez. 'I've wanted to fur some time, but didn't like to make bold; but now seem's as good a time as any.' 'They're all talkin' of him,' I sez. 'Well,' he sez, 'I don't mean the dead, but the livin' boy—the one folks calls Big Tom. I've heard his story, an' I got a good look over him down here in the store a while ago. Woman'—he sez it jest like that—'if that big boy o' your'n had a little operation, he'd be as good as any.'

"I answered him patient, an' told him what ailed Tom an' why he couldn't be no different—jest what old Doc Andrews told us—that they was a little piece o' bone druv deep into his skull that time he fell. He spoke real vi'lent then. 'But—my Lord!—woman,' he sez, 'that's what I'm talkin' about. If we jack up that bone'—trepannin', he called it too—'his brains'd git to be like anybody else's.' Told me he wants fur us to let him look after it. Won't cost anything unless we want. They's a hospital to Rockville would tend to it, an' glad to—when we git ready. . . . My poor Tommy! . . . Don't seem's if it could be true."

Her face softened, and she broke up suddenly.

"I got good boys all round," she wept. "I always said it; an' now folks know."

Luke lay on the old settle, thinking. In the air-tight stove the hickory fagots crackled, with jeweled color-play. On the other side Tom sat whittling silently — Tom, who would presently whittle no more, but rise to be a man.

It was incredible! Incredible that the old place might some day shake off its shackles of poverty and be organized for a decent struggle with life! Incredible that Maw — stepping briskly about getting the supper — should be singing!

Already the room seemed filled and warmed with the odors of prosperity and self-respect. Maw had put a red geranium on the table; there was the crispy fragrance of frying salt pork and soda biscuit in the air.

These the Hayneses! These people, with hope and self-esteem once more in their hearts! These people, with a new, a unique place in the community's respect! It was all like a beautiful miracle; and, thinking of its maker, Luke choked suddenly and gulped.

There was a moist spot on the old Mexican hairless right under his eyes; but it had been made by tears of pride, not sorrow. Maw was right! A hero's folks hadn't ought to cry. And he wouldn't. Nat was better off than ever — safe and honored. He had trod the path of glory. A line out of the boy's old Reader sprang to his mind: "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." Oh, but it wasn't true! Nat's path led to life — to hope; to help for all of them, for Nat's own. In his death, if not in his life, he had rehabilitated them. And Nat — who loved them — would look down and call it good.

In spite of himself the boy sobbed, visioning his brother's face.

"Oh, Nat!" he whispered. "I knew you'd do it! I always said you'd do somethin' big for us all."